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ABSTRACT

This digest uses a question-and-answer format to summarize basic issues about the inclusion of children who are deaf or hard of hearing in classrooms with normal hearing students. It briefly reviews the history of the inclusion movement and identifies two general positions in the debate: (1) that all students have the right to go to school with their non-disabled peers, and (2) that all students with disabilities should go to regular schools, the "full inclusion" position. Parents are reminded that inclusion is an option, that their child has a right to inclusion (despite possible resistance by school authorities), but that inclusion might not be appropriate for all children with hearing losses. Identified among the benefits of inclusion are: being able to live at home, opportunities for communication with the hearing world, opportunities for learning the standards of the hearing world, and availability of a wider range of academic or vocational programs. The identified limitations of inclusion are: the potential for isolation from teachers and peers, fewer opportunities for direct instruction, limited opportunities for direct interaction with peers and professional support staff, and limited availability and quality of support staff. Parents are provided with suggestions about questions to consider before choosing the inclusion option. (DB)

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Educating Children Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing: Inclusion

Richard Nowell and Joseph Innes

What is meant by inclusion?

The "inclusion" of students who are deaf refers to their being educated within a classroom of students with normal hearing. Inclusion differs from "mainstreaming" in that mainstreaming may refer to a variety of degrees of contact with hearing students, whereas in inclusion, the student who is deaf is actually placed in a classroom with hearing students. Inclusion may involve an assortment of services including interpreters, notetakers, teacher aides, teachers of students who are deaf, and consultants, but these services are provided within the context of the regular classroom.

Before 1975, although there had been attempts to educate students who were deaf in regular schools, about 80% of students who were deaf in the United States were being served in special schools (Cohen, 1995). This changed with the passage that year of PL 94-142. The "Education of All Handicapped Children" act called for all children to be educated as appropriate in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE), which meant to the greatest extent possible with their "non-handicapped" peers. Although the law resulted in some students who were deaf being educated in the regular classroom, many students with hearing losses were put in self-contained classrooms or resource rooms within regular schools and had contact with hearing students only during non-academic activities. In 1995, more than 60% of students who were deaf were educated in the regular public schools (Cohen, 1995), although it is not clear how many were in being served in a true "inclusion" model.

Inclusion emerged from the Regular Education Initiative (REI) of the 1970s and 1980s and the modification of PL 94-142, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990. The application of inclusion to the student who is deaf has been a source of ongoing debate, particularly as to how to interpret "least restrictive environment."

Two general positions have emerged from the debate on inclusion. One position is that all students with disabilities *have the right to go to school with their non-disabled peers*. The other position is usually labeled "full inclusion" and is stronger in its position that *all students with disabilities should go to regular schools*. The first position is consistent with the range of placements which emerged from PL 94-142 and IDEA, while the latter position is generally consistent with the eradication of all "special education," including the closing of special schools for students who are deaf.

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Who can choose an inclusion option?

Should parents wish their deaf child to be in an inclusion program, they would indicate their preference during discussions with their school district and/or special education intermediate unit concerning their child's recommended assignment and individualized education program (IEP). Some school districts or intermediate units may indicate that an inclusion option is not available for deaf children in their area or that inclusion is not appropriate for that parent's deaf child. Nothing in existing laws supports excluding children who are deaf from an inclusion placement.

On the other hand, the absence of such regulations does not mean that inclusion is appropriate for all children with hearing losses. Parents should make the decision based upon an informed consideration of all options and discussions with various educational professionals. If the local education agency (LEA) does not agree to an inclusion placement and parents continue to believe that inclusion is right for their deaf child, they have the right to due process to challenge the LEA's decision. The LEA may recommend inclusion, even though the parents do not think inclusion is appropriate. Once again, if the parties involved cannot reach agreement, the decision for placement would go to due process.

What are some possible benefits of inclusion?

1. Opportunity for the student who is deaf to live at home. Those students who are deaf who attend a special school that is beyond commuting distance must live at the school during the week. Students in an inclusion placement in their local school are able to be with their families during the week.

2. Opportunity for communication with the hearing world. Daily association with hearing students in an inclusion setting might help students who are deaf to better develop their ability to communicate with hearing people, leading to skills they will need in later years.

3. Opportunity for learning the standards of the hearing world. Students who are deaf and attend schools for children who hear may be able to master the norms of hearing society better than those who are immersed in the culture of a special school for students who are deaf.

4. Availability of academic or vocational programs. Students who are deaf may find a wider range of academic or vocational programs in their home school district than in their nearest special school.

What are some limitations of inclusion?

1. Potential for isolation from teachers, peers, and other members of the school community. Inclusive environments may not comprise individuals adept at communicating in deaf individuals' preferred language and mode of communication.

2. Opportunities for direct instruction are limited. Inclusion of deaf individuals often means receiving translated or transliterated messages through an interpreter or transliterator.
3. Opportunities for direct and independent interaction and communication with peers and the professional support staff are limited. Deaf individuals may constantly require an interpreter to communicate effectively with peers and professionals. School counselors, medical personnel, and administrators often are not able to communicate directly with a student who is deaf, which limits their access to support services that are readily available to other students.
4. Availability and quality of support staff. There may not be an adequate supply of qualified interpreters or other support staff in the local school district to provide a desirable level of communication access to the educational process.

What are some questions to ask before choosing this option?

The first question a parent, professional, or other individual needs to ask when considering inclusion for a deaf child is whether this environment will provide the intellectual, social, and emotional development the student who is deaf needs and to which he or she is entitled?

To answer this important and multifaceted question adequately, several other related questions need to be addressed, including: What is the individual's hearing level and ability to use residual hearing? What is the individual's preferred mode of communication, and is it practiced in the environment? Will the individual have access to captioning services, notetakers, hearing aid services, TTYs, and the use of other assistive devices? What is the individual's academic level? What is the level of direct communication that will occur in the environment between the individual, teacher(s), and peers? Will the individual's language abilities and needs be adequately addressed? Are there a sufficient number of other children who are deaf of similar age and level with which the individual can socialize? Is the school staffed by certified and qualified personnel who are trained to work with the student who is deaf? Does the school provide a full range of assessment instruments and techniques designed for use with students who are deaf? Are there personnel trained to conduct such assessments in the individual's preferred language and mode of communication? What level of access will the individual have to curricular and extracurricular offerings? Will there be deaf role models in the environment? Are there any teachers or administrators in the environment who are hard of hearing or deaf who may serve as role models?

The most important issues, when contemplating inclusion for a deaf individual, are related to language and communication. At the very least an individualized education program (IEP) for a child who is deaf must consider the following (U.S. Department of Education, 1992):

- Communication needs and the child's preferred mode of communication
- Linguistic needs
- Severity of hearing loss and potential for using residual hearing; academic level
- Social, emotional, and cultural needs, including opportunity for peer interactions and communication.

A local education agency (LEA) or state education agency (SEA) cannot presume that inclusion is appropriate for a child who is deaf without incorporating the above issues in its IEP process. Likewise an LEA or SEA cannot presume that a deaf child belongs in a center or residential school for deaf children.

References and Additional Resources

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